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Cross-Cultural Adaptation as an Intergroup Phenomenon Antecedents, Processes and Manifestations

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2018

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Bierwiazzonek, K. M. (2018). *Cross-Cultural Adaptation as an Intergroup Phenomenon Antecedents, Processes and Manifestations: Antecedents, Processes and Manifestations*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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Summary

This thesis is an attempt to bridge two scientific fields: cross-cultural adaptation and intergroup relations. Reaching out for concepts and models from both fields, it examines the role of intergroup factors as antecedents, moderators and, ultimately, as manifestations of cross-cultural adaptation. In the first step, the current state of the art in adaptation research was investigated to identify, on the one hand, those intergroup factors that are the most relevant, and on the other hand, those that are understudied. In the second step, I conducted several studies with adapting populations to better understand the connections between cross-cultural adaptation and intergroup factors such as perceived discrimination, threat, social identification or representations of host-nationals.

Chapter 2 reports a systematic review of the literature covering 217 quantitative studies on cross-cultural adaptation published between 1988 and 2014. The review examined three groups of social-contextual variables relevant to adaptation: (1) variables related to culture learning (socio-cultural adaptation as an outcome; cultural distance and social interaction as predictors), (2) variables related to stress and coping (psychological adaptation, stressors, social support) and (3) family-related variables. The coverage of these factors was found to differ for different adapting populations. The expatriate literature shows little interest in psychological adaptation and factors related to stress and coping (e.g., acculturative stressors). The literature on first-generation migrants rarely measures socio-cultural adaptation directly (i.e., using socio-cultural adaptation scales) and shows little interest in factors related to culture learning (i.e., cultural distance, structural measures of intergroup contact). The international student literature is the most diverse and the least congruent; the only factors it hardly includes are those related to family. In conclusion of this literature review, I argue that addressing these omissions would be beneficial for all three research areas.

Chapter 3 reports a meta-analytical study consisting of 119 different meta-analyses of 213 primary studies, as well as moderation analyses with six moderating factors. Besides the broad categories of variables related to culture learning, stress and coping, this study included a number of sub-categories (e.g., self-rated cultural distance and 'objective' cultural distance; interaction with co-nationals and with host-nationals; etc.) One conclusion is that among the different factors related to the social context of adaptation, intergroup factors such as quality of intergroup contact ($r = .45$) and perceived discrimination ($r = -.41$) show the strongest association with cross-cultural adaptation. Furthermore, the strength of the association between any given factor and adaptation rarely varies between adapting populations. These and other findings of this meta-analysis support the existence of universal adaptation processes regarding culture learning, stress and coping by showing that related factors (cultural distance, social interaction, social resources and social stressors) indeed affect adaptation similarly across adapting populations.

Chapter 4 reports a study following up on the meta-analytical finding that adaptation is strongly influenced by intergroup tensions, such as expressed in perceived discrimination. This study consisted of an online survey that was completed by 220 international students sojourning in eight European countries. Participants who identified strongly with the group of fellow international students experienced less negative effects of perceived discrimination on their psychological adaptation. In contrast to that, participants who identified strongly with their home country experienced more negative effects of symbolic threat on their sociocultural adaptation. This suggests that minority group identification may have an ambivalent role: it may aggravate intergroup tensions if the reference is the culture of origin, but it may also serve as a resource to cope with intergroup tensions as long as the group at stake is not associated with the culture of origin.

Chapter 5 reports a set of three studies that used the Reverse Correlation Paradigm (RCT; Dotsch, Wigboldus, Langner, & van Knippenberg, 2008) to examine how adaptation is reflected at the level of social cognition. RCT is an implicit measure that allows for grasping visual representations of any social category of interest. I focused on representations of the host national outgroup held by newcomers as a function of their degree of cross-cultural adaptation. In these studies, mixed samples consisting of international students, expatriate academics and migrants residing in Portugal produced images of a ‘typical Portuguese’ as seen at different adaptation levels. In a second phase, these images were evaluated by independent judges. The results were consistent across studies and showed that being poorly adapted translates into having a more negative representation of the Portuguese host nationals. In other words, adaptation manifests itself in the way newcomers represent local people.

Taken together, the studies presented in the current thesis systematize and advance the knowledge of the role of intergroup factors in cross-cultural adaptation. In the last Chapter 6, I discuss the main insights from this work and their implications. For instance, links between intergroup factors and adaptation could be more easily understood if social-cognitive adaptation, manifested in a more or less adequate representation of the host national group, was viewed as a distinct dimension of cross-cultural adaptation in addition to the affective (psychological) and the behavioral (socio-cultural) dimension. Redefining adaptation in terms of a functional relationship with the host culture rather than success could help achieve a more congruent approach across the different adapting populations. Distinguishing between absolute fitness (i.e., whether the newcomer is able to function within the new culture) and relative fitness (i.e., how well the newcomer functions within the host culture as compared, for example, to locals) could be helpful to account for advanced levels of adaptation in long-term intercultural transitions. Overall, this

thesis shows that the links between intergroup factors and adaptation are consistent and often strong, which suggests that by supporting immigrant and sojourner adaptation, one contributes to building harmonious intergroup relations in today's multicultural societies.